

"Glimpses of Heaven Through African Eyes: Reflections on a Zimbabwean Soup Kitchen"

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by: Sarah Stark



Though the doors to the soup kitchen did not open until eleven o'clock, they sometimes let the children in early, to allow them a brief respite from the streets. This morning, Respect arrived much earlier than the others, so she sat quietly at a table, waiting for the rest of the children to come. She knew only too well the daily struggles they faced, and was grateful to have been rescued from her own desperate plight a few short weeks ago. The church women had been more than kind to her, taking her in when they discovered her to be an orphan, living alone on those dangerous streets.

When she had first come to them, they had supposed her to be the younger sister of one of the other children; it had been weeks before they discovered that she, though only seven years old, had been living alone, homeless, since her parents' death. With only the clothes on her back she had come, two days a week, for the only meals she knew she would find. Upon hearing her story, they had taken her in; now she had food, shelter, and clothing. Yet no one knew all the horrors that lay hidden behind her large, sad eyes.

Alice was a small woman, but she had learned how to make herself heard during her time at the soup kitchen. She issued orders in a severe voice, and walked ceaselessly about the room, making sure everything was set up properly and that everything was ready to begin letting people inside.

She stopped for a moment to speak with me, telling me she hoped that, despite all the turmoil, I would enjoy my visit to Zimbabwe. Her eyes grew very sad, and she sighed.

"It was once a beautiful country," she told me, then she walked away.

The fire behind his dark eyes suggested Lennox's mischievous spirit, and his jaunty manner of walking and saucy tongue confirmed him as a trickster. Well-known by all of the volunteers at the church, the young boy appeared whenever the doors were opened; despite his tendency to get into trouble, Lennox was clearly beloved by all of the workers. His fiery personality surfaced anew when he scrambled with the other boys for second helpings, his feet—dirty, rough and calloused, but with perfectly straight toes that had never been crammed into shoes—pattering across the floor.

The adults began to trickle through the doors, filling the tables in the front of the soup kitchen. At one of these tables sat a man who, though he was young, appeared much older because of the many cares written on his face. A long scar cut through one of his eyebrows, which loomed darkly over his hollow eyes.

The young man, whose name was Joseph, observed our rather conspicuous group of American volunteers for several minutes, then beckoned to me. When I came to him, he asked me for sweets; he had seen the bags of peppermints we carried, and could not remember the last time he had had such a treat. I handed him some candy, then knelt beside him, asking his name. He told me, and shared a part of his story: he had been, he said, an "habitual criminal" for many years, until he had given his life to the Lord. Though he had reformed, his life remained hard, and I saw in his eyes both his sorrow and his hunger.

By far the tallest man in the room, the lanky, six-foot-ten-inch man whom everyone knew simply as "Stretch" walked about the room, seating those who came to the door. He was firm with them, repeatedly telling them to stay seated, while volunteers brought them their plates; not so long ago he had been one of the recipients, rather than the volunteers, at the soup kitchen, and he knew how the system worked.

Stretch shared with the American visitors about his days as a basketball player, which had ended due to a knee injury, and about his family, whom he described as "the three women in my life who are very jealous over me," otherwise known as his wife and two daughters, aged eight and eleven. He was glad to speak with us, yet his watchful eyes never stopped scanning the room around him, making sure all was running smoothly.

A woman, followed by her husband and a teenaged girl, entered and sat down. She was eager to speak with the American volunteers, and smiled as I walked toward her, displaying two rows of broken and missing teeth. Maureen began to share her story, as well as that of her family.

"Life on the streets is hard," she said. "I have had a knife put to my throat; I was saved only by the grace of God. My husband has been brutally mugged several times. I have lost both my daughters, and my

Maureen is mentally retarded."

She gestured toward the young girl who had followed her inside.

"This is Sarah," she said.

She told me that Sarah had been offered a job at a nightclub, but that, though jobs were very hard to come by amidst the many political and economic hardships facing the people of Zimbabwe, she had managed to convince Sarah to turn down the job.

"God will provide her with decent work, according to His plan," she said. Her eyes lit up as she expressed her faith that God had a plan to redeem Zimbabwe, and she thanked Him aloud for the many blessings He had given her.

I was visibly moved by her words; seeing this, Maureen folded me into her arms and squeezed me tightly.

"May God give you strength," she said, her eyes sparkling.

Near Maureen sat a woman whose pale skin and long, dark hair stood out strongly against the faces of the others waiting in the room. Also remarkable were her pale green eyes, so different from the sea of brown eyes around her. She, too, wished to speak with me, and waved me toward her. Glancing at my patterned skirt, Tracy explained her desperate need for new clothing, for she had only the clothes on her back, and they were torn and dirty.

Soon, Tracy began to open up with me about her own life. She shared that she had two teenaged children, a son and a daughter, who lived with their grandmother in South Africa. Tracy had not seen her children in thirteen years. When I asked her why she had not seen them, she shrugged, explaining that everyone has their own problems.

Tracy eagerly questioned the state of affairs in America, wondering if we, too, were familiar with hardships and injustices. She seemed strangely pleased to hear that even America was not perfect; it was as if she needed to believe that her diagnosis that "everyone has problems" was really true.

Having heard part of my conversation with Maureen, Tracy asked whether or not I truly believed that God was capable of providing for her needs. She seemed interested in my faith, and, her eyes searching my face, asked me a few more questions before letting me go.

Before the food was served, everyone involved with the soup kitchen paused to join in a time of worship. The people began to sing, lifting up praises in English, Shona, Ndebele. Looking around at the faces in the room, my soul seemed to lift: the little old man in the Boston Red Sox toboggan; the young woman in traditional African clothing, holding her baby; the group of children, clustered together at one table; black and white, young and old they came, hands lifted and eyes raised to heaven, singing praises to Almighty God.

I felt my own eyes fill with tears; it took several moments before I could join in, I was so taken aback by the sight before me. I wanted to run back to Alice, to tell her that the beauty of her country was still evident, particularly in the strong faith of its people. I wanted to grab Respect, Lennox, and all the other children we met and just hug them, and tell them that I loved them and that God loved them. I wanted to empty my suitcase then and there, and leave all my clothing with people like Tracy who needed it much more than I did.

As I joined in the worship around me, I realized that, though I had come intending to help the people of Zimbabwe, it was I who had been blessed. I had caught a glimpse of heaven through African eyes, and even then I knew that it was a sight I could never forget.